

## Doing good the wrong way: Contemporary Southern Non-Governmental Organizations' Praxis Viewed Through History

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**Abstract:** Using a narrative summary, this article synthesizes NGO history, highlights the political economy and pro-NGO arguments; and uses these to examine what contemporary NGOs in the global South do. It raises contradictions between what these organizations do and historical arguments that justified their growth in the development sector. It shows that NGOs are doing good the wrong way, a contradiction obscured by the functional approach used to measure their effectiveness in research and evaluation. The article argues that because this approach focuses on the linear logics of NGO aid projects, they are assessed against what they choose to do and not what history argued they would. Arguments for the return of the Developmentalist State and changes from the looming end of the liberal international order, inherently flag the need to establish NGO contribution to development without comparisons to the State or market; then strategically adjust the NGO 'Articles of Faith'.

**Keywords:** NGO History, Southern NGOs, Development Effectiveness, Civil Society, NGO Role

**Sommaire :** En utilisant un résumé narratif, cet article synthétise l'histoire des ONGs, soulignant l'économie politique et les arguments pour la raison d'être des ONGs, et utilise cela pour examiner ce que font les ONGs contemporains. Il souleve les contradictions entre ce que font les organisations non gouvernementales du sud (ONGSs) et les arguments historiques qui ont justifiés leur croissance dans le secteur du développement. Ceci montre que les ONGSs font le bien d'une mauvaise façon, une contradiction dissimulée par l'approche fonctionnelle utilisée pour mesurer l'efficacité dans la recherche et l'évaluation. Cet article soutient que du fait que cette approche se concentre sur les logiques linéaires des projets d'aide des ONGSs, ces ONGSs sont évalué par rapport à ce qu'elles choisissent de faire et non à ce que l'histoire a soutenu qu'elles feraient. Les arguments pour le retour de l'état développementaliste et les changements provenant de la fin imminente de l'ordre international libéral soulignent la nécessité d'établir la contribution des ONGSs au développement sans comparaisons avec l'état ou le marché, puis ajuster stratégiquement les 'Articles de Foi' des ONGs.

### Introduction

Since the 1980s, the number of NGOs particularly in developing countries exploded and by 2006, the sector was worth \$1trillion a year and considered to be the eighth largest economy in the world (Hall 2006). Local

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and International NGOs are estimated at 60,272 and 7,757 respectively by the Union of International Associations (2015). Estimates on the number of NGOs in Africa show that the late 1970s and 1980s were characterized by a rapid growth of NGOs. In Kenya, NGOs grew at 150% between 1980 and 1988 (Fowler & James 1994) and from several hundred in 1990 to more than 8,000 by 2012 (Brass 2012); in Botswana they grew by 60% between 1985 and 1989, and in Tunisia, from 1,886 to 5,186 between 1988 and 1991 (Fowler & James 1994). Registered NGOs in Uganda have been estimated at 1,000; 13,000 and 14,027 by NGO Task Force (1991) and NGO Bureau (2018 and 2019) respectively.

The amount of literature on NGOs has grown in tandem with this increase in number (Brass *et al.* 2018). Despite the abundance of literature on the historical arguments that justified the sector's growth, these arguments are not referred to when the effectiveness of contemporary NGOs is studied in academia and practice. This article uses historical hindsight to examine what contemporary NGOs do and how they do it. The article has four sections; the first presents a historical synthesis of NGO evolution showing the political economy and pro-NGO arguments that justified the sector's growth. Using this historical hindsight, the second section highlights key contradictions in contemporary NGO praxis and explains how the functional approach used to measure NGO effectiveness obscures these contradictions. Section three discusses observations and reflections from the review of literature and the last section provides the conclusion.

### **Historical Synthesis of NGO Evolution**

The history of NGO activity is traced to a deeply woven interplay of simultaneous, and in some cases, chronological global events and processes. These include the evolution of mainstream development economic traditions (Killick 1989; Engle 2010), World War I, II and the Cold War (Edwards & Hulme 1995; Charnovitz 1997; Dicklitch 1998; Lewis 2004) the evolution of development theories (Lewis & Kanji 2009), history of development aid, and State and market inefficiencies (Berg 1981; Dicklitch 1998; Engle 2010; Murad & Alam 2016).

Charnovitz (1997) gives a seven-phased account of NGO history (1775-1992), explaining the events and processes that triggered and characterized each. *Phase I Emergence (1775-1918)*: Individuals with shared interests formed issue-oriented national NGOs. These organizations sought to influence policy related to slave trade, pursuit of peace, workers' solidarity, free trade, human trafficking, nature, rules of law, strengthening international law and promotion of NGOs among other things. Societies for these were formed, treaties signed, and international cooperation initiated. This recognition strengthened NGO capacity to influence government and triggered the NGO self-awareness through the creation of the Union of International Associations.

*Phase II NGO Involvement (1919-1934)*: The League of Nations, formed after World War I (1914-1918), involved NGOs in many of its activities in health, business, labour, communication, and statistics among others. NGOs' involvement was either from the outside, working to push issues for inter-government consideration or from the inside, working directly with governments and international civil servants to address international problems.

*Phase III Disengagement (1935-1944)*: Like the name suggests, this was a dormant period with few new techniques for NGO participation and reduced engagements between NGO and governments. Bertram Pickard, Secretary of the Federation of Private Organizations at the time suggested that this was because of heightened world tensions accruing from the Second World War, increased number of NGOs, increased bureaucratization of the League Secretariat and acknowledged greater technical competence of NGO representatives compared to government officials.

*Phase IV Formalization (1945-1949)*: The working arrangements between the League of Nations and NGOs were formalized in Article 7 of the United Nations Charter, reaffirming the value of NGOs that had dwindled in the war years.

*Phase V Under achievement (1950-1971):* After the Cold War (1947-1991), NGOs focused majorly on human rights issues.

*Phase VI Intensification of NGO involvement (1972-1991).* NGOs expanded their activities and sought to influence through action and words. They grew in numbers, size and diversity, increasing their impact especially in environment and human rights issues.

*Phase VII Empowerment (1992 to date).* A phase that Charnovitz described at the time of his publication. This period had intensive participation of NGOs, which had gained more access to international organizations and exerting greater influence in multilateral negotiations.

A closer review of specific events and processes mentioned in NGO history unraveled a detailed political economy in which these organisations sprouted and positioned themselves in the development sector. The different accounts of development economics evolution; Classicism, Neo-Classicism, Keynesianism, and Neoliberalism show economic philosophy shift between market fundamentalism and an expanded role of the State and how these shifts influenced development theories and practices (Killick 1989; Sandbrook 1995; Stiglitz 2002; Engle 2010). Classicism and neo-classicism traditions focus on market fundamentalism (private capital and property, free operation of forces of demand and supply, individualism, production, and constricted role of the State) and its weaknesses were the primary cause of the Great Depression 1929-1939, and the subsequent coining of Keynes General Theory 1936 (Killick 1989; Engle 2010). Keynesianism critiqued these largely capitalist views and argued that the State could and should intervene in economics and development planning; a disposition that influenced both global economic analysis and practical shifts in Government policies (Meade 1975). The subsequent promotion of Keynesianism (Meade 1975), the success of the centralized State in Russia in a period when capitalist market economies were in crisis, and the rapid decolonization in Africa between 1945-1965 (Berg 1981; Killick 1989; Engle 2010) resulted into the extension of the State's economic, social and political roles in society.

This growing influence of the State in social service provision later faced crisis because of the post-1970 oil price crisis in the existent weak business sector. The deficit and external debt burden that came with this crisis reduced the capacity of States to handle development responsibilities, resulting into the mid-1970s - 1980s economic crisis in Africa (Berg 1981). The Overseas Development Institute (1982), Berg (1981) and Greene and Khan (1990) summarize the effect of this crisis on countries in Black Africa. They show how this manifested in different countries like Zaire, Ghana, Uganda, Nigeria, Zambia, Malawi, Chad, and Côte d' Ivoire. In varied magnitudes, these countries struggled to handle recurrent expenditures, implement investment programmes and maintain infrastructure. Zaire, Ghana and Uganda suffered inflation estimated at 30% per annum, while Zambia, Malawi and Côte d'Ivoire increased commercial borrowing by more than 10%. There was political unrest, abuse of human rights and extreme cases of civil unrest in Chad and the Horn of Africa. This crisis was a key pedestal for the neoliberalism economic offensive in Africa (Killick 1989; Sandbrook 1995; Stiglitz 2002; Engle 2010) and a blueprint for the Structural Adjustment policies introduced and implemented by the Bretton Woods Institutions (Kennedy 2003).

The Bretton Woods International Institutions, namely the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) were part of the 1944 economic and financial plan for the post-World War II reconstruction and development coined by the United States and United Kingdom (Kennedy 2003). These institutions were formed to solve the recurrent failure of capitalism, the crisis it generated in form of depression and the failure of the State. They were hence assigned to foreign investment and international monetary management issues, respectively. The 1981 World Bank diagnosis of the mid-1970s economic crisis in Africa set the stage for the implementation of neoliberalism in Africa (Sandbrook 1995; Stiglitz 2002; Engle 2010; Heidhues & Obare 2011). The crisis in Africa was hugely attributed to the overextended State in sub-Saharan countries which increased expenditure and inefficient allocation of resources, in excess of the revenue that was generated (Berg 1981;

Heidhues & Obare 2011). The Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), also known as the ‘Washington Consensus’ and their stabilization policies were introduced in Africa by the World Bank and IMF in the 1980s as a way to reverse the crisis. It is argued that 70 developing countries were subjected to 566 stabilization and structural adjustment programmes between 1980-1993 (Kingston 2011); pushing for privatization of State companies and services, market fundamentalism, devaluation and trade liberalization. The implementation of these policies saw the paring of State size and responsibility in favor of the private sector and the entrenchment of market fundamentalism (Stiglitz 2002; Heidhues & Obare 2011; Kingston 2011). Not only did the State largely fail, but it also provided the private sector and market forces space to have an increased role in setting the social-economic agenda in sub-Saharan Africa.

However, in the late 1990s, the SAPs and their trust in the private sector and market fundamentalism attracted strong critique because of the negative effects in many African countries like Côte d’Ivoire, Uganda, Senegal, and Zimbabwe (Kingston 2011). Such countries were left with a huge social service delivery deficit, a gap NGOs positioned themselves to fill (Dicklitch 1998; Eagleton-Pierce 2016; Kingston 2011). Riding on the perceived failures of the State, NGOs gained trust from the development sector as critically summarized by Tendler (1982) in what she calls ‘NGO Articles of Faith’. These articles, later extended by Fowler (1998), list the perceived advantages that NGOs have as development actors over the market and the State. These include: i.) Capacity to reach the poor (targeting their assistance to the chosen groups), ii.) Capacity to obtain meaningful participation of the intended beneficiaries, iii) Achieving the correct relationship between development processes and outcomes, iv.) Working with people and thus choosing the correct form of assistance for them, v.) Flexibility and responsiveness to their work, vi.) Working with and strengthening local institutions, vii.) Achieving outcomes at less cost (efficient), viii) Ability and preparedness to experiment with unorthodox ideas and practices, ix.) Patience coupled with strategic perspective, x.) Faster learning through, and application of, experience and xi.) Ability to articulate rural realities.

With this trust in hindsight, as early as 1993, the World Bank reported that one-third of all approved development aid projects included some NGO involvement, a proportion that increased to over half in the next year (World Bank 1995). This trust is also demonstrated by the Organization of Economic Corporation and Development which has NGOs as one of the five aid channels (Murad & Alam 2016).

Scholars like Edwards and Hulme (1995), Charnovitz (1997), Dicklitch (1998), Lewis (2004) and Murad and Alam (2016) argue that the NGO sector as a vector for channeling foreign development aid spiraled after the Second World War era. The war era influenced postwar development theories which evolved from the ‘grand’ theories of Modernization and Dependency, into the pragmatic theories of neoliberalism and alternative development (Lewis & Kanji 2009). The pragmatic theories contributed to the construction of the identity of NGOs. They described NGOs as having strong grassroots links, field-based expertise, the ability to innovate and adopt, being more cost-effective and emphasizing sustainability (World Bank 1995; Lewis & Kanji 2009). These arguments were more often than not made by riding on State and market inefficiencies in service delivery (Dicklitch 1998; Zaidi 1999; Lewis & Kanji 2009). This predisposition was further propelled by the success of the President Truman’s Economic Recovery Act and the 1948 Marshall Plan that allocated US\$13 billion to help rebuild the war-torn Europe. The success of this plan provided the global political and intellectual bases for aid to the Third World and the formation of the Organizations of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1961 as a pool for Official Development Aid (ODA) to Third World countries (Murad & Alam 2016).

ODA, which represents 70% of total external finance to least developed countries, has been generally increasing since 1970, with only a 9% decrease in the 1990s (OECD 2011). This external finance increased by 30% between 2006 [USD105.6bn] and 2017 [USD146.6bn] (OECD 2018). All the 37 OECD countries committed to provide 0.7% of Gross National Income (GNI) as development aid in the 1950s/60s. In 2017 ODA/GNI was 0.31% (0.39% less of the target) and ODA/GNI to low developing countries was 0.09% in 2016 (compared to the target of 0.15-0.20%) (OECD 2018). This ODA aid is channeled through five

structures namely; i.) Government, ii.) Private entities, iii.) Public-Private Partnerships, iv.) NGOs and Civil Society and v.) Research institutions and think tanks. The OECD Credit Reporting System (2017) shows that aid through NGOs increased from under 10% in the 1970s to 25% in 1985 and between 2008 to 2017 gross disbursements amounting to USD 165,646.52 million were channeled to and through NGOs and Civil society to developing countries. Recent analysis from the OECD Credit Reporting System shows that between 2010 and 2018 USD 177,455 million was channeled to and through NGOs and Civil society to developing countries (OECD 2020). The role of NGOs in development is further underscored in the 2000-2015 and 2030 Development agendas (UNDP 2015).

This historical synthesis shows that NGOs evolved from basic interest groups to fully-fledged organizations in the development sector; their growth stimulated and sustained by events, processes and philosophies of development economics. Even with the existence of a shared social mission, aid history shows the evolution of different types of Non-Government Organizations, a process influenced by differences in interests, location, capacities and role. These include Northern NGOs (NNGOs), Southern NGOs (SNGOs) and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) which are part of the aid system and the project mode of aid delivery. The apex of NGO growth was the intense criticism of State-led development approaches in the 1970s and the popular dissatisfaction with the Structural Adjustment Programmes, particularly in Africa. SNGOs hence emerged as an alternative and gap fillers to the State; the former suggesting that NGOs have the capacity to perform the roles of the State and the latter that NGOs can complement State interventions. It is with this historical hindsight that this article examines what contemporary NGOs do, how they do it, and later articulates key reflective observations.

### **Southern NGOs Doing Good the Wrong Way and Why**

The preceding historical synthesis shows that literature on development economics, development theory and development aid argues that compared to the State and market, local NGOs have strong grassroots links, field-based expertise, the ability to innovate and adopt, are more cost-effective and emphasize sustainability (Dicklitch 1998; Lewis & Kanji 2009; World Bank 1995; Kingston 2011). While contemporary NGOs are largely formed to achieve objectives related to poverty reduction similar to those in their history, they experience partial or complete mission drifts and implement their interventions in a 'straitjacket'. The four linked factors below explain i.) the contradictions between what contemporary NGOs do and what their history argued they would do and ii.) Why these contradictions exist.

#### ***Donor Conditions and Priorities***

As service providers, NGOs aim to contribute to development through project-based and intentional activity to yield tangible outputs specifically for the disadvantaged often described as the poor of the poor (Jennings 2008). Contemporary NGOs provide a broad spectrum of aid-financed services ranging from livelihood, health, education, agriculture, governance, emergency response and human rights among others (Aldashev & Navarra 2017; Banks & Hulme 2012; Brass *et al.* 2018; Nalere *et al.* 2015; Riddell 2014). While this is congruent with the historical expectation of the sector, a closer look at literature on NGO funding showed that the priorities in NGO objectives are determined by their volatile donors' conditions and priorities. These conditions and priorities vary in terms of choice of projects, geographical coverage, timeframes, budget amounts and delivery mechanisms. Being largely dependent on aid for maintenance and delivery of their objectives, NGOs are therefore predisposed to volatile changes related to unpredictability of funding, mission displacement, reduced organizational autonomy and complications regarding their accountability loyalties (Ebrahim 2003; Najam 1996). As a result, NGOs end up torn between their target groups and donors, more often than not putting donor loyalty before their target groups. This explains why most NGOs emphasize upward and external accountability to donors, leaving downward and internal accountability comparatively weak (Ebrahim 2003).

#### ***Multiple Determinants of Aid Allocations***

Different scholars show that aid allocation at the macro level is more often than not influenced by a variety of factors beyond just poverty numbers and needs. Berthelemy (2005) analysed data from 27 recipient

countries, 22 donors and 36,000 observations covering 1980-1990. This shows that aid allocation is determined by political linkages with recipient countries, trade ties, needs of recipients, governance and growth performance. Briggs (2018) confirms this using household surveys and aid project locations, and the work of Zhang (2004), Nunnenkamp, Öhler, and Sosa Andrés (2016), Nunnenkamp, Sotirova, & Thiele (2016 and Öhler & Nunnenkamp (2014) to conclude that aid does not favor areas with the poorest people. This is because the findings showed that less than half of aid allocations were made in areas with the poorest people.

Similarly, the argument that SNGOs target the poor of the poor is challenged by scholars (Tendler 1982; Chambers 1983; Tvedt 1998; Dicklitch 1998; Zaidi 1999; Lewis and Kanji 2004; Riddell 2014). Basic logic requires that if aid is to achieve the overall aim of poverty reduction, it should flow to where the poor live and should hence fix the factors that expose and keep them in poverty. Studies from China, India and different African countries show that this is not often the case. There are several factors beyond just poverty numbers and priorities that influence where and what NGO aid projects are implemented. These include donor country political interests, political linkages with recipient countries, trade ties, quality of governance and economic growth of recipient countries (Berthelemy 2006; Briggs 2018; Chambers 1983; Gilles & Yontcheva 2006; Nunnenkamp et al. 2017).

Arguing that NGOs are pre-occupied with rural development, Chambers (1983) describes six biases that affect how rural development is perceived and researched by funders, practitioners and researchers. These include spatial biases, project biases, person biases, dry season biases, politeness biases and professional biases. Specific to targeting the poor of the poor, Chambers illustrates how these biases interlock to not only leave out the voices of the poor but also influence the choice of 'show pieces' or model beneficiaries or villages studied in research and evaluations. The skewed targeting of active/progressive poor not only contradicts the historical arguments that NGOs target and understand the realities of the poor but also inaccurately frames perspectives about the progress of rural development and the projects implemented by NGOs.

### ***The Project Aid Straitjacket***

The international aid system considers under-development to be a 'deficit' in capital, knowledge, and technology. It is believed that this can be reversed by the transfer of resources from richer to poorer economies through discrete packages of resources and activities they label projects. This project mode of delivering aid assumes that the cause-effect relationships between the 'deficits', shift of resources and changes in human wellbeing can be determined, predicted, and controlled, thus a linear process (Eagleton-Pierce 2016). It is this linear time-bound project straitjacket that NGOs are expected to operate in. This approach has been challenged in literature and practice because it ignores factors outside the project that can affect outcomes and the complexities that come with human and social development issues (Anderson *et al.* 2012; Eyben 2013). This has over the decades inevitably constructed a short-term performance framework for NGOs' contribution to poverty reduction that is characterized by achievement of immediate objectives with little or no long-term changes (Anderson *et al.* 2012; Eyben 2013; Riddell 2014; Tendler 1982).

When critically analysed in literature, the consistent interplay of the factors above sustains the meagre contribution of NGOs to development. These factors throw doubt on the historical, political and economic claims that NGOs are alternatives or gap fillers to State inefficiencies, serve the poor of the poor and fundamentally contribute to the broader development agenda.

### ***Measuring NGOs' Effectiveness: The Functional Approach***

Effectiveness, performance, contribution, and impact are words used synonymously in NGO literature. In this article, the concept of effectiveness is emphasized to match its common use across the body of academic and practice literature.

Amidst strong criticism of State and market-led development approaches, NGOs positioned themselves to provide social services to the poor, thus forming ground for their global growth and trust in the sector, particularly in Africa. In the late 1980s, however, NGO pessimists argued that this trust was a reaction to the perceived failure of State-led approaches to development and not necessarily due to any proven feasible benefits or alternatives offered by NGOs. This pessimism triggered the demand for evidence regarding NGO effectiveness (Aldashev & Navarra 2017; Brass *et al.* 2018; Dicklitch 1998; Edwards & Hulme 1995; Jennings *et al.* 2008; Leczy *et al.* 2012; Lewis & Kanji 2009; Tvedt 1998; Zaidi 1999).

In a bid to respond to this demand, scholars, donor organizations and NGO practitioners have studied NGO effectiveness. With reference to decades of literature, it goes without saying that there are fundamental challenges in determining what constitutes NGO effectiveness or effective NGO performance. Key challenges include the absence of a universal definition of NGOs, multiple definitions and parameters of effectiveness used by donors, government, NGOs and beneficiaries; unclear role of NGOs in the development sector, and varied donor requirements and project/programme design tools (Aldashev & Navarra 2017; Brass *et al.* 2018; Riddell 2014). With this appreciation in hindsight, the most commonly used functional approach to measure NGO effectiveness is critiqued below.

For the last three decades, research and evaluation have used what I have termed in this article, a functional approach to measure NGO effectiveness (Brass *et al.* 2018; DeConinck & Riddell 1992; Patrick *et al.* 2015; Riddell 2014; Tendler 1982). Highly influenced by the globally accepted OECD evaluation blueprint (measure of effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, appropriateness, sustainability and coherence), this functional approach only analyses the linear, narrow and time-bound NGO project logics (*input, outputs and outcomes*) to determine NGO effectiveness. Riddell (2014) studied NGO evaluations commissioned by different funding organizations and observed that findings are based on internally managed assessments and success is judged on whether aid projects achieve their immediate objectives; ‘immediate project success’ is considered as a measure for effectiveness. He notes that the focus on immediate objectives has contributed to the exaggerated success rates of 75% and more. Similar observations were made by Tendler (1982) in her review of 75 NGO aid project evaluations and the review of 150 project evaluations from Africa and Asia done as part of the literature review for this article.

Therefore, by focusing on immediate objectives, the functional approach lends itself to the narrow and linear NGO project design, which only serves to provide accountability for project aid. With no reference to historical expectations of the sector, NGOs are assessed against what they choose to do and not what history argued they could and would do. By excluding the historical hindsight, findings from research and evaluation on NGO effectiveness tell us what contemporary NGOs have done and nothing about whether they fulfill the assumed NGO comparative advantage persistently raised in literature.

## **Discussion**

Historical arguments for NGO growth underestimated the task of proving NGO comparative advantage over the State and market. To demonstrate comparative advantage, organizations with the same purpose but with different traits are compared to establish which is more suitable for achieving a particular purpose (Fowler 1988). When this view is applied to NGOs, State, and market, the argument of NGO comparative advantage is flawed because these entities neither share purpose nor motivations for development. Not only is it flawed in principle, but there is also mounting proof from three decades of research that shows NGOs are more often than not operating as independent donor-driven organizations, transmission mediums of political preferences, and not always the altruist poverty-centered organizations described in history (Briggs 2018; Fowler 1991; Jennings *et al.* 2018; Tvedt 1998; Wright & Winters 2010; Zaidi 1999). This observation triggers concerns regarding the value for the aid that has been pumped into the NGO sector based on the claim of comparative advantage.

The Credit Reporting System (2017) showed that aid through and to NGOs increased from under 10% in the 1970s to 25% in 1985. Between 2008 to 2017 gross disbursements amounting to USD 165,646.52 million were channeled to and through NGOs and Civil Society to developing countries. Most recent analysis from the OECD Credit Reporting System shows that between 2010 and 2018, USD 177,455 million was channeled to and through NGOs in developing countries (OECD 2020). In the wake of the 2030 agenda and the global effects of the COVID 19, strategic and evidence-based resource allocation is and will continue to derail development. It is therefore better that NGOs are assessed for their net value without comparing them to the State or market. Once this contribution is established, it can guide the adjustment of the famous NGO 'Articles of Faith' and the writing of a 'New History' for the sector. These are fundamental steps to accurately situate the NGOs in development discourse, apportion expectation, and aid in the efforts to achieve the 2030 agenda in developing countries.

The scanty precision that surrounds the NGO phenomenon is compounded by two factors found in NGO history. The first is the lack of a universal definition of NGOs, which is typical of Civil Society organisations. Different scholars and organizations define NGOs in different ways that embrace multiple organizations (Lewis & Kanji 2009; Tvedt 1998). Research and evaluation are therefore pre-occupied with studying an unclear phenomenon, partly explaining why there is a difference between what NGOs do and what their history claimed, why findings about NGO contribution are inconclusive and why evaluations focus on the narrow NGO project logics. Secondly, the praise of, and trust in NGOs did not come with a performance 'yard stick' to guide the oversight of the sector. NGO literature is muddled with jargon that shifts between describing NGOs as part of the alternative development agenda, to describing them as an alternative and gap filler, thus suggesting that this sector is able to do what the State is supposed to be. Can NGOs do what the State is supposed to do? Should NGOs be examined against State roles? How can we measure NGO effectiveness if their role is unclear? Unless these questions are answered, NGOs will continue to sprout globally under the guise of development and accurate measurement of their contribution will remain an illusion not only to national development, but also to the global development sector.

In addition to clearly understanding the value of NGOs, it is imperative to note that the philosophical arguments discussed earlier in this article, that catapulted NGOs into the development sector four decades ago are currently changing and others are being strongly critiqued. Two major considerations stand out: First, the increased critique of neoliberal governance and its beliefs in market self-regulation/ laissez-faire approach to regulating economics and development since the onset of the global financial crisis in late 2008 (Erlanger 2008; Springer 2015; Peck et al. 2010). This criticism triggered discussions about the post-neoliberalism era and the need to 'bring back' the Developmentalist State to the center of development management. An increased role of the State would require a reformulation of the role and space in which the market and NGOs operate in development. The history of NGOs can be summarised as: *NGOs would not have existed if the State and market were effective and efficient*. Evidence from the United States shows that NGO lifespans are hinged on how long State and markets are inefficient and ineffective. The current documented limitations, and in many cases, failure of NGOs to demonstrate real contribution to poverty reduction insinuates that an adequate State system may be the best alternative to State failure. With this in mind, and while there is a lot to learn from the Asian tigers' (Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan), Africa must be cognizant of the need to tailor such models and related lessons to design models for the African context.

Secondly, the potential changes from the looming end of liberal international order have manifested in different ways. Some of these include the hostilities towards liberal internationalism in the United States, the Brexit (Ikenberry 2018), aid institutional mergers like the DFID and Foreign Office merger (2020), the looming diversion of aid from development to political diplomacy and the effects of COVID 19 on donor economies and the potential reprioritisation of resources to cater for local health and economic needs. The uncertainties from these processes may have an effect on the post-world war era agenda of building a greater union and development aid allocations. It is therefore important that the role and operational space of NGOs

in the development sector is analysed in view of both philosophical and practical changes happening in the very political economy that favored the sector's growth.

Despite the blurred history regarding the role of local NGOs, contemporary literature provides some hope for clarity. Scholars document how this role has evolved over the past two decades through NGOs-State relations. Two broad perspectives have been used to describe these relations. First is a relationship that is oppositional, antagonistic and conflictual. Second, it is mutually interdependent and complementary. Makoba (2018) argues that these relations co-exist on a continuum, with most NGOs finding themselves somewhere in the middle, depending on the situation and NGOs focus. NGOs are considered as complementary when implementing programmes within local development plans and as confrontational when they question government policy and advocate for changes.

This development in NGO role, though not entirely new as seen in Charnovitz (1997) historical account, provides an opportunity to streamline NGO role. However, I implore that while it is strategic to embrace and explore this opportunity, any analysis of the role of NGOs should keep a critical view of the role, how this role contributes to development in real terms, and the aid resources pumped to and through them. It is only then that the development sector can have a critical analysis for both the role and the value for money accruing from the decades of aid investment in and through NGOs. This approach can be used to generate critical data to construct a 'New History' for NGOs. Further still, with the hindsight that most NGOs are hugely dependent on external finance from donors, predisposed to volatile changes in donor priorities, loyalty and accountability issues will continue to strain NGO-State relations. It may therefore be strategic to include donors as a critical player in the NGO-State relations' equation: Donor-NGO-State relations. This will discard ideological positions that demote one actor over another as a way to facilitate synergies towards social transformation.

### **Conclusion**

While this article does not argue that NGOs should only or always be studied from a historical perspective, it highlights that without that historical hindsight, the historical claims of NGO comparative advantage and the functional approach to research and evaluation will continue to sustain an exaggeration of the sector's contribution to development. Research and evaluation approaches should therefore go beyond this formalistic approach to analyse the assumed NGO comparative advantage as a way to confirm or disaffirm the NGO rhetoric and also identify their niche, if any.

### **Disclosure statement**

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